

LESSON TWO

TITLE The Initial Ministry of the Servant

SCRIPTURE Mark 1:21 – 3:12

MEMORY VERSE

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)

MAIN IDEA OF TEXT

Jesus teaches and heals with authority.

BEGIN this time in prayer, confessing any Sins you know of, thanking the Lord for the gift of his Word, and asking the Holy Spirit to guide your study.

1 GRAB THEIR ATTENTION

TEACHER TIP

Start your lesson by telling a story that relates to the main idea of the lesson to grab the attention of your participants. In this section, we have provided you with two options, but feel free to develop your own.

OPTION 1: "I SURRENDER"

As believers we are called to live under the authority of our king, Jesus, and surrender ourselves to his will. Instead of living to please ourselves and living life by our own code, Jesus commands us to live to please him and live by his ways. He invites us to surrender completely to him and experience life as it was meant to be lived—under his love and leadership.

Let's watch a performance of the song "I Surrender" by Hillsong Worship. Pay close attention to the lyrics, in particular, these lyrics:

*Like a mighty storm
Stir within my soul
Lord have Your way
Lord have Your way in me*

*Like a rushing wind
Jesus breathe within
Lord have Your way
Lord have Your way in me*

(Play song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpcQjpatyA>)

POTENTIAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What does it mean to surrender yourself to God and his will?
2. What makes it difficult for us to surrender ourselves completely to God?
3. What do we miss out on by not living under God's authority?

Transition Statement from Attention Grabber to Text: Jesus did miraculous things and gave commands that revealed his authority and, at the same time, surrendered himself and his authority entirely to God the Father. Jesus obeyed what the Father commanded him to do and was ever faithful to God and the mission he was sent to accomplish. Jesus modeled for us a way to live under God's authority and that is what we are going to be talking about this week.

OPTION 2: PROLOGUE FROM THE FILM BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

We are hardwired for story. We love epic legends and fairy tales. We love stories about heroes, princesses, beasts, battles, and dragons which have been passed down from generation to generation for thousands of years. Perhaps there's something inside us that wishes for those fairy tales to be true and actually come to pass.

One of the most beloved fairy tales is Beauty and the Beast, a story in which only true love can free the main character who has been

transformed into a monstrous beast. Let's watch the prologue to the Disney version of this classic story.

(Play clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2rDrKU6bM>)

POTENTIAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. *What is your favorite fairy tale? Why is it your favorite?*
2. *Why is hope essential for us in life and in our relationship with God? Why do we need it? What happens if we do not have it?*
3. *How can God's love free and transform us?*

Transition Statement from Attention Grabber to Text: Some argue that all great and lasting stories have elements of God's redemptive story (the gospel) woven into them. We see this in many of the plot elements in *Beauty and the Beast*. The prince's selfishness and pride were the sins that cursed him to remain a beast unless he learned to love and be loved in return. Sin does that to us. It takes us prisoner and turns us into something hideous. We cannot be saved or transformed unless we access the saving and healing power of God's love, which is most clearly seen in Jesus's death and resurrection.

Jesus came to this earth on a mission to bring us back to God by giving his life to serve and die for us. This week we are going to look at the initial ministry of Jesus, God's Servant, and how his ministry was to reverse the physical and spiritual effects of sin. Motivated by love and compassion, Jesus healed the sick, freed the demon-possessed and showed the religious leaders of his day, the Pharisees, that he came, not for the righteous, but for sinners.

TEACHER TIP

In this section, you will find the historical, cultural, and literary context you need to properly interpret and apply the text.

OUTLINE

1. Jesus Exercises His Authority through Teaching and Healing (1:21-2:12)
 - A. Jesus in the synagogue (1:21-28)
 - i. Jesus teaches with authority in the synagogue (vv. 21-22)
 - ii. Jesus drives out a demon (vv. 23-28)
 - B. Other healing accounts (1:29-34)
 - i. Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law (vv. 29-31)
 - ii. Jesus heals many drives out demons (vv. 32-34)
 - C. Jesus withdraws to pray (1:35-39)
 - i. Jesus rises early to pray (v. 35)
 - ii. Jesus gives directions to his disciples for additional ministry (vv. 36-39)
 - D. Jesus heals a leper (1:40-45)
 - E. Jesus heals a paralytic (2:1-12)
 - i. Jesus arrives in Capernaum and begins preaching (vv. 1-2)
 - ii. Jesus forgives the sins of a paralytic (vv. 3-9)
 - iii. Jesus demonstrates his authority by healing the paralytic (vv. 10-12)
2. Jesus Encounters the Pharisees (2:13-3:6)
 - A. Jesus: a friend of sinners (vv. 13-17)
 - i. Jesus calls Levi, a tax collector (vv. 13-14)
 - ii. Jesus eats with sinners and rebukes the Pharisees (vv. 15-17)
 - B. Jesus put to the test (vv. 18-28)
 - i. About fasting (vv. 18-22)
 1. Jesus explains why he and his disciples do not fast (vv. 18-20)
 2. Jesus uses metaphors to explain the new era and new ways of God's kingdom (vv. 21-22)
 - ii. About the Sabbath (vv. 23-28)
 1. The Pharisees accuse Jesus and his disciples of breaking the law (vv. 23-24)
 2. Defends their actions (vv. 25-27)
 3. Jesus declares his authority as Lord of the Sabbath (v. 28)
 - C. Jesus puts the Pharisees to the test (3:1-6)
 - i. Jesus asks whether it's lawful to heal on the Sabbath (vv. 1-5)
 - ii. The Pharisees begin to plot against Jesus (v. 6)
3. Jesus Grows in Popularity (3:7-12)
 - A. Large crowds from surrounding areas come to Jesus for healing (vv. 7-9)
 - B. Jesus heals many and drives out demons (vv. 8-12)

CONTEXT

After 30 years of preparation, Jesus has just begun his earthly ministry. Before he launches his ministry, he is baptized and spends 40 days in

the wilderness being tempted by Satan. When he emerges from the wilderness, he begins preaching the good news of God's kingdom and calling disciples to follow him.

FALLEN CONDITION FOCUS

We are naturally rebellious toward authority and do not like being told who we are or what to do. Sin makes us spiritually dead and in need of healing and restoration.

GOSPEL RESPONSE

Jesus uses his authority to reveal our fallen condition and forgive sin. Only through him can we be truly healed and restored from the inside out.

TEACHER TIP

In this section, you will find exercises you can use to lead your class through the process of Observation, Interpretation, and Application. As the teacher, work through all the exercises below to ensure you gain a good understanding of the text.

Jesus has officially launched his ministry and Mark wastes no time in getting right to the action that takes place as Jesus travels throughout Galilee, preaching and teaching about the good news of God's kingdom, healing the sick and driving out demons. Frequently Mark notes how Jesus does these things with authority and Jesus's authority is a primary focus for us in this section of Mark's gospel. Without proper authority from God, Jesus cannot be the Messiah and he cannot do the things that the Messiah is supposed to do. That is why Mark establishes Jesus as the true Messiah who does the Messiah's work from the beginning of his ministry.

Mark also reveals Jesus to us as God's Servant, sent by God into a broken world filled with suffering people. He displays authority and gives commands that even demons obey; but as a servant, he ministers under God the Father's authority and obeys his commands. His mission would be to reverse the physical and spiritual effects of sin through healing, exorcisms and, ultimately, his death and resurrection. Jesus is the promised king over God's kingdom, but he would not become king through military strength and political savvy but by serving others and giving his life as a sacrifice for sin.

21 And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. 22 And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. 23 And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, 24 "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God." 25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." 28 And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.

29 And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30 Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. 31 And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

32 That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. 33 And the whole city was gathered together at the door. 34 And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

35 And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. 36

And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, 37 and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." 38 And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." 39 And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

40 And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." 41 Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean." 42 And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. 43 And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, 44 and said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them." 45 But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter.

2 And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. 2 And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them. 3 And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. 4 And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay. 5 And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." 6 Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 7 "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" 8 And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question these things in your hearts? 9 Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'? 10 But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"— he said to the paralytic— 11 "I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home." 12 And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!"

13 He went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. 14 And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.

15 And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. 16 And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" 17 And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

18 Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" 19 And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with

them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. 20 The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. 21 No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. 22 And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins.”

23 One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. 24 And the Pharisees were saying to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” 25 And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: 26 how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?” 27 And he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. 28 So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

3 Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. 2 And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. 3 And he said to the man with the withered hand, “Come here.” 4 And he said to them, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. 5 And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. 6 The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

7 Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea, and a great crowd followed, from Galilee and Judea 8 and Jerusalem and Idumea and from beyond the Jordan and from around Tyre and Sidon. When the great crowd heard all that he was doing, they came to him. 9 And he told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, lest they crush him, 10 for he had healed many, so that all who had diseases pressed around him to touch him. 11 And whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, “You are the Son of God.” 12 And he strictly ordered them not to make him known.

OBSERVATION: WHAT DOES IT SAY?

OBSERVATION EXERCISE 1: CHART THE PASSAGE

This passage contains significant words and actions of Jesus. Read through the passage and make a list of the things Jesus both says and does.

OBSERVATION EXERCISE 2: IMPORTANT DIALOGUE

Read Mark 2:13–3:6 and look closely at Jesus’s dialogue with the Pharisees. What do the Pharisees say about or to Jesus? How does Jesus respond to them?

OBSERVATION EXERCISE 3: CROSS-REFERENCING SCRIPTURE

Look up the following passages that reference times when people were amazed by Jesus: Matthew 8:27, 9:8, 9:33, 15:31, Mark 1:27, 2:12, 6:51, Luke 5:26, 8:25, 9:43, 11:14. Note the similarities you see in these passages.

INTERPRETATION: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

INTERPRETATION EXERCISE 1: CHART THE PASSAGE

Go back to your list. Put similar words and actions together. For each group of repeated ideas, thoughts, note the actions. What do they reveal about Jesus’s character? What do they reveal about Jesus’s purpose?

INTERPRETATION EXERCISE 2: IMPORTANT DIALOGUE

Often the Pharisees are used in the gospels as characters to reveal the dangers of religion and legalism. What did the Pharisees not understand about Jesus and his mission?

INTERPRETATION EXERCISE 3: CROSS-REFERENCING SCRIPTURE

In some of the passages you looked up, it says people were amazed and glorified God. Why is it significant that amazement led these people to glorify God?

TEACHER TIP

In this section, you will find questions to choose from that will help your group consider how God is calling them to respond to the text. Help your group set measurable action steps.

APPLICATION: HOW DO I RESPOND?

QUESTION 1: How have you been amazed by Jesus and the work he has been doing in your life recently? What should our response be to the amazing work of Christ?

QUESTION 2: Where in your life is God calling you to surrender to him and to his will? What might be keeping you from making a total surrender to him?

QUESTION 3: Think of a phrase or statement you can use to remind yourself that you are to live under the authority of King Jesus. What is it?

QUESTION 4: In what areas of your life and relationships do you most need God's healing and restoration?

QUESTION 5: In what practical ways could you follow Jesus's model as a servant and serve others with love and compassion?

4

CHALLENGE

TEACHER TIP

End your time of study with one final challenge and prayer. Your final challenge should pull together everything you covered in this lesson and call your participants to action.

Early in Jesus's earthly ministry we see him exercising his authority, revealing that his ministry had spiritual power unlike anything they had ever seen before. He had the authority to forgive sin, something only God can do. Jesus could forgive sin because he was God in human flesh. He was God's Servant sent on a mission to reverse the physical and spiritual effects of sin through his life and ministry. He could heal the diseased and free the demon-possessed because he had authority over the natural and supernatural world. Later in Mark, we'll see how the biggest blow to sin and its power came when Jesus died and rose from the grave, proving that sin, death, and the forces of evil could have no authority over him.

As sinners it is natural for us to rebel against God's authority. Ever since the Fall the human heart has been darkened by sin. Instead of choosing to live under God's authority and obey what he commands, we want to make ourselves God and do what we want. But there is a better way—the way of Jesus. He modeled for us what it looks like to live under God's authority and obey what he commands. He served others out of love and compassion and calls us, his Church, to do the same.

Through him we can experience healing and restoration. Through him we can be the kind of church that brings healing and restoration into our relationships and into our communities. Through him we can have hope in the present and for the future that the painful and destructive effects of sin are being reversed with every life that is changed by King Jesus and every person that chooses to live under his authority and obey what he commands.

LET'S PRAY

COMMENTARY

MARK 1:22-25

Jesus performed many miracles and cast out demons during his earthly ministry, but that wasn't the main purpose of his ministry. In his commentary in *The ESV Study Bible* Hans F. Bayer helps us understand the main purpose of Jesus's ministry.

The core purpose of Jesus' earthly ministry was **teaching**, rather than performing miracles or casting out demons—actions which accompanied his teaching and attested to God's presence with him (see v. 15; 2:1-12; 3:1-6; 7:1-13). The **scribes** mentioned here may have been a local group of pious, literate men who taught in the synagogues, in distinction from the higher-ranking scribes who "came down from Jerusalem" and were bold enough to challenge Jesus directly (3:22). Jesus taught with his own divine **authority**, not simply repeating the traditions of others.

An unclean spirit tries to resist Jesus' power and his teaching on the kingdom of God, but he correctly fears that Jesus has come to **destroy** him. The act of naming Jesus as **the Holy One of God** may display the demon's attempt at exercising power over Jesus. But Jesus resists and tells the unclean spirit, "**Be silent.**"

MARK 1:34

In his commentary in the *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible*, D.A. Carson points to the restorative power of Jesus seen in his healings and exorcisms and the fact that they are proof that he was the promised Messiah and Son of God.

From the beginning Jesus' astonishing power to heal (cf. 5:30) various diseases is a striking and unique characteristic of his ministry. In the first century, medical care was, at best, extremely basic, and infirmities and illnesses were widespread, so Jesus' reputation understandably spreads like wildfire, and people from farther and farther away flock to him (e.g., vv. 40-45; 2:1-12; 3:8-10; 6:54-56). In Israel's Scriptures, God is the one who heals his people of all their diseases (Exod. 15:26; Deut. 32:39; Ps 103:3), and the absence of illness is a sign of Israel's restoration (e.g., Isa 33:24; 35:5-6). Although the crowds do not understand, Mark's audience already knows that Jesus is the coming "more powerful" Lord (vv. 2-3, 7). **drove out many demons**. Mark makes a distinct point of this because it especially testifies to Jesus' having bound Satan (3:27-29). Since this is something only God can do (cf. Rom 16:20; Jude 9), it confirms yet again Jesus' identity as the coming Lord and the presence of God's saving kingdom in him (vv. 14-15; see 4:11). **would not let the demons speak**. In the ancient world the gods were fundamentally about power, and Israel's popular expectation was for a mighty warrior Messiah who would drive out the Romans. Because the demons know who he is, Jesus silences them because their confession would mislead the people. The true nature of his divine Sonship and power could not be properly understood apart from his obedient death on the cross. He later prevents his disciples from proclaiming him as Messiah for the same reason (8:30). The time will come for such public confessions (cf. 14:62; 15:39), but not yet.

MARK 2:10-12

Jesus's healing of the paralytic is thought to be a story that emphasizes Jesus's compassion. Certainly, Jesus was compassionate toward the man when he healed him, but Walter W. Wessel and Mark L. Strauss in their commentary, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, argue that there is another emphasis we should be looking for in the story.

Some commentators have taken the first part of v. 10—"But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—to be a narrative aside addressed to Mark's readers rather than a statement to the scribes. This view is meant to solve the problem of the awkwardness of the parenthetical remark, "he said to the paralytic," in the second half of the verse, and also to reserve Jesus' public use of the title "Son of Man" until after the crucial incident of 8:29. The title "Son of Man" occurs only two times before 8:31 (here and in 2:28) but twelve times from then onward as Jesus' title for self-disclosure to his disciples (cf. G. H. Boobyer, "Mark 2:10a and the Interpretation of the Healing of the Paralytic," HTR 47 [1954]: 115-20; Lane, 96-98; Cranfield, 100).

While this interpretation is possible, nothing in the context suggests a change of addressees. The "you" of v. 10 is most naturally taken as the scribes addressed in vv. 8-9. A narrative aside would lose much of the dramatic effect of the episode, where Jesus claims the very authority the scribes deny him in v. 7. Jesus' pronouncement is the critical point of the episode. Most telling against this view is the fact that the gospel writers never use the title "Son of Man" in their editorial comments (with a possible exception being Mk 2:28, which is also disputed).

"Son of Man" is Jesus' most common self-designation in the Gospels. In the OT the Hebrew designation *ben adam* ("son of man") means "a human being" (see Ps 8:4), and Jesus' use of the title certainly points to his humanity. Yet there is further significance to the title. The OT book of Daniel speaks of "one like a son of man," an exalted messianic figure who comes with the clouds of heaven and receives authority, glory, and sovereign power from God, setting up an eternal kingdom that will never be destroyed (Da 7:13-14; cf. 1 En. 34-53). On several occasions in Mark, Jesus identifies himself with this messianic figure (8:38; 13:26-27; 14:62). Historically, Jesus probably preferred the title because it expressed his identity without the political and military connotations that titles such as "Christ" and "son of David" carried in first-century Judaism. He could use it to define his messiahship on his own terms. In Mark's narrative Jesus uses the title to demonstrate his messianic authority (2:10, 28), affirm his mission of service and suffering (8:31; 9:9, 12; 10:33-34), and predict his return in glory to save and to judge (8:38; 13:26-27; 14:62).

What does it mean that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins "on earth"? There are three main possibilities for the meaning of the phrase: (1) a sphere of influence, in contrast to the Father's authority in heaven; (2) "here and now" (i.e., during Jesus' earthly ministry, perhaps in contrast to the Son of Man's future authority in heaven); (3) as qualifying "sins," and so meaning "earthly sins" (i.e., those committed by human beings). The first is most likely, not in the sense of limiting Jesus' authority, but rather to show that divine authority to forgive sins is not the exclusive right of the Father in heaven—it is now rightfully exercised by the Son of Man on earth (cf. France, 129).

The words "he said to the paralytic" constitute a parenthesis to explain that the following words are addressed not to the teachers of the law but to the paralytic. Presumably, Jesus indicated his change by some sort of gesture.

The healing verified the claim to grant forgiveness. As surely as actual healing followed Jesus'

statement "Get up" (v. 11), so actual forgiveness resulted from his saying "your sins are forgiven." Hunter, 38, writes, "He did the miracle which they could see that they might know that he had done the other one that they could not see."

The man responded immediately (euthys; not translated in NIV) "In full view of them all" (i.e., the entire crowd and especially the teachers of the law, who had challenged Jesus' authority to forgive sins), the ex-paralytic walked out. Again, the response of the crowd (presumably the "all" includes the teachers of the law) was one of amazement, and Mark records the added response of their giving praise to God for what had happened. Never before had they witnessed anything like this event.

The significance of this story is not to be understood primarily in terms of the compassion that moves Jesus to heal the man's paralyzed body. The emphasis is on the forgiveness of sins, the root cause of all sickness and disease. In this act of forgiveness Jesus was declaring the presence of God's kingdom.

MARK 2:13-17

Jesus called disciples to follow him from different backgrounds and at different places on the societal ladder. Geoffrey Grogan notes in his commentary in the *Focus on the Bible Commentary* that Jesus is the Great Physician for the sick of this world and accepts anyone who acknowledges their need for him and receives him.

Jesus continued to call disciples. Where would you expect God's great Messiah to gather followers? Probably among the priests in the temple or the teachers in the synagogues, among those whose whole lives were concerned with the worship of God and the word of God. But did he? No! First of all he called the manual workers, men with hands roughened by physical toil and who smelled of fish. Somebody has said that God must be very fond of ordinary folk, because he created so many of them. Here is even stronger evidence. It was ordinary folk Jesus first called to follow him, and the same ordinary folk were later sent out to spread his gospel and establish his world-wide church. It is mostly ordinary folk who do this still. Paul, commenting on the Corinthian church, says, 'not many of you ... were influential, not many were of noble birth' (1 Cor. 1:26).

Next he called a 'middle-class' man. Still surprising, but just a little less so? No, this was more, not less surprising. The fishermen were at least pursuing an acceptable trade, but this man was a hated and despised tax-collector! Tax-collectors have never, of course, been popular in any society, although their work is important if a society is to function properly. The attitude of the Jewish people towards them was not however based chiefly on the fact that they were commissioned to collect money from them. Rather it was because of their links with the hated Gentile power that was occupying their land. As an employee of the Gentile Romans, Levi, called Matthew (meaning 'gift of God') in Matthew 9:9, would be regarded by the Jews as perpetually unclean. No self-respecting rabbi would have anything to do with him. Incidentally, his ready response to the call would have had considerable financial implications for him, as his office was extremely lucrative.

To make matters worse, Jesus joined Levi at table with other tax-collectors and assorted disreputables, the kind of people the ostracised tax-collectors would often associate with. In the culture of the times, a meal with another person betokened acceptance and friendship even more than it does in our own. For many observers, that would have ruled Jesus out of account not only as the Messiah, but even as a man of God. You can almost hear them saying, 'A man is known by the

company he keeps.'

Here then we see in an actual event a kind of acted parable of the gospel. Christ accepts sinners who receive him, and welcomes them to fellowship with him at his table. Christian readers, both in the first century and today, would be reminded of the later institution of the Lord's Supper for the disciples. Levi (or Matthew, of course) was to be there at that supper when Jesus presided over it. Many if not all his disciple-companions at the Last Supper had a better social standing in their community than he and his friends; nevertheless they were sinners too. This would remind those early readers of the Gospel, as it reminds us, that God accepts us on the basis of his own unmerited favour, and not through any imagined righteousness of our own.

In Jesus, God's own healing was coming into a sick world. A doctor cannot be blamed if sick people ignore his skill, refusing even to recognise their need of it. The terms, 'righteous' and 'sinners' (v. 17) represent the valuation the people concerned placed on themselves, and of course the valuation the Pharisees put on the tax-collectors and their friends. This was vividly illustrated by Jesus in one of his parables (Luke 18:9-14), and also just as clearly (when we take its context into account) in the story of the Prodigal Son and the Elder Brother (Luke 15:1, 2, 11-32). Without doubt the Pharisees were just as sick as the tax-collectors, but they assumed the role of the healthy. How self-deceived they were!

Awareness of our need is all-important. Self-righteousness bars the door to the Saviour.

MARK 2:13-27

Jesus often clashed with the Pharisees over issues related to God's law. In his commentary on Mark in *The Holman New Testament Commentary*, Rodney L. Cooper helps the reader understand what Jesus and the Pharisees discussed in their clashes and how the Pharisees reveal that legalism can make Pharisees of us all.

It is hard for Western Christians to grasp the implications of the Sabbath. We may think of it as "a day of rest," and therefore do not work on the Sabbath. The Jewish conception of "do not work," however, was much stricter. More rules surrounded the keeping of the Sabbath than any other commandment. In the mind of the Pharisees, they were commanded to keep the Sabbath holy (Exod. 20:8-11). Think about their position a moment. How would you keep this command? The commandment says that on the seventh day, do no work. You are a good Pharisee and you desire to keep this command with all your heart. How do you do it?

If I do not go to work on the Sabbath, is that enough? But what about working around the house? Okay, no house work. No preparing meals because, as any cook can tell you, preparing a meal is work. Untying a sash is not work because it is relaxing something. Tying something, however, is work and is forbidden. What about walking? That can certainly involve work. So do I not walk at all? Or when does walking become work? How far can I travel and have it not be considered work? The Sabbath laws, and the purity laws, encompassed every moment of life. If you were a good Pharisee, there was not a moment of your life that you did not question whether what you were doing was violating either the Sabbath or the laws of purity.

The Jews were even forbidden to defend their lives on the Sabbath. Barclay discusses the wars of the Maccabees and how the Syrians finally overcame them by attacking on the Sabbath because they were not willing to break Sabbath laws (Barclay, Mark, p. 67).

And so the laws became more and more minute as the Pharisees, with the very best of motives, tried to define work. The fences they set around the Sabbath became larger and larger, encompassing more and more, as they tried to make sure the Sabbath was not broken. While setting up minute rules ensured that they kept the Sabbath, the Pharisees also became expert at finding the loopholes in their own law. Legalism in this context loses sight of the holy and becomes a way to “get away with” whatever you can. As we will see in Mark 3, their legalism led them to plot murder while vowing to keep the Sabbath holy.

Mark 2:16 is the first place in Mark’s Gospel that mentions the Pharisees. Today, we as Christians know that the Pharisees are the “bad guys” in the story and so we miss some of the impact of Jesus’ dealings with them. For a moment, let’s try to shed our presuppositions and look at the Pharisees as the people in Jesus’ time would have looked at them. Philip Yancey, in his popular book *The Jesus I Never Knew*, says that the Pharisees were the party of the middle class. They were neither separatists, like the Essenes, nor collaborators, like the Sadducees, nor rebels, like the Zealots. They held tightly to standards of purity and the law. The word Pharisee comes from the Aramaic word *perisayya*, meaning “separated.” They regarded themselves as separate from the Gentiles, the common people and non-Pharisaic Jews. They were cautious men who were dedicated to protecting their religion.

When Jesus came to town, the Pharisees stood on the edges of the crowd, watching, waiting to see what he would do, testing him because they were not sure they could trust him. And they could not trust him. The primary goal of the Pharisees was to maintain their religion. Jesus’ presence upset the status quo as he tried to get men and women, the Pharisees included, to seek a richer relationship with God. The Pharisees were distinguished from the scribes, also enemies of Jesus. The scribes were a certain class of people. The Pharisees were from all walks of life. Some were political, but most were not.

As Christians, we will often run up against pharisaism. In Mark 2:16, the Pharisees were identifying Jesus with those whom he associated with. In other words, he was guilty by association. A friend of mine volunteered for a time at Colorado AIDS Project. While she was in training to work with the AIDS patients, she did odd jobs at the project. One night while she was stuffing envelopes with a group of other people, a stranger walked in. My friend’s first thought was, “What if this person thinks I am gay?” That is the risk we take when we associate with those who are not like us. It is the risk Jesus took and did not refute.

Another place we may run into pharisaism is in our own hearts. It is very easy to let zeal for God turn into judgmentalism against others. We must be zealous in rooting this sin out of our hearts, even if it means letting God break our hardened hearts.

MARK 3:1-12

Warren W. Wiersbe, in his commentary in *The Bible Expositor’s Commentary*, notes the growing danger and crisis Jesus faced as his ministry and exposure grew.

On that same Sabbath Day, Jesus went into the synagogue to worship; and while He was there, He deliberately healed a man. Certainly He could have waited one more day, but once again He wanted to challenge the pharisaical legalistic traditions. This time the Pharisees (Luke 6:7) were expecting Him to heal, so they kept their eyes wide open. Our Lord’s questions in Mark 3:4 were never answered by His enemies. Since evil is at work every day, including the Sabbath Day, why should good not be

at work as well? Death is always at work, but that should not hinder us from seeking to save life.

Jesus could see “the hardening of their hearts” (literal translation), and their sin made Him angry. Our Lord never became angry at the publicans and sinners, but He did express anger toward the self-righteous Pharisees (Matt. 23). They would rather protect their traditions than see a man healed! The man, of course, knew little about this spiritual conflict. He simply obeyed our Lord’s command, stretched out his hand, and was healed.

So incensed were the Pharisees over what Jesus had done that they united with the Herodians and started making plans to arrest Jesus and destroy Him. The Herodians were not a religious party; they were a group of Jews who were sympathetic to King Herod and supported his rule. Most of the Jews despised Herod and obeyed his laws reluctantly; so it was surprising that the Pharisees, who were strict Jews, would join themselves with these disloyal politicians. But it was a common enemy—Jesus—that brought the two groups together.

In response to this united opposition, Jesus simply withdrew from there; but He could not prevent the great crowds from following Him. These crowds were dangerous to His cause, of course, because they were not spiritually motivated; and the authorities could accuse Him of leading a popular revolt against the Romans. Yet Jesus received the people, healed the sick, and delivered the demonized. Once again, He warned the demons not to reveal who He is (Mark 1:23–26).

Our Lord had now reached a crisis in His ministry. Great crowds were following Him, but their interest was not in things spiritual. The religious leaders wanted to destroy Him, and even some of Herod’s friends were getting involved. His next step would be to spend a night in prayer (Luke 6:12), call twelve men to assist Him as His Apostles, and preach a sermon—The Sermon on the Mount—explaining the spiritual basis of His kingdom.

He offered them forgiveness, fulfillment, and freedom; but they refused His offer.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Hans F. Bayer, *Mark*, The ESV Study Bible.

James A. Brooks, *Mark*, The New American Commentary.

D.A. Carson, *Mark*, The NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible.

Rodney L. Cooper, *Mark*, Holman New Testament Commentary.

Donald English, *The Message of Mark*, The Bible Speaks Today.

Timothy Gombis, *Mark*, The Story of God Bible Commentary.

Geoffrey Grogan, *Mark: Good News from Jerusalem*, Focus on the Bible Commentary.

Grant Osborne, *Mark*, Teach the Text Commentary Series.

Leland Ryken, Introduction to *Mark: Literary Features*, The ESV Study Bible.

R.C. Sproul, *Mark*, The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version.

Charles Swindoll, *Mark*, Swindoll’s Living Insights New Testament Commentary.

Walter W. Wessel and Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary.

Warren W. Wiersbe, *Mark*, The Bible Exposition Commentary.

